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## BOE illustrates reform fight

The Board of Education's majority response to a member's advocating a decentralized state school system is indicative of the bureaucratic response to any effort to force a change.

The state BOE, which would cease to exist in its present form under the plan proposed by Gov. Linda Lingle, went after one of its own members, Laura Thielen, because of her outspoken support for allowing Hawaii voters to decide if seven elected local school boards could do a more effective job of administering Hawaii's government schools.

State lawmakers who seem unwilling to allow voters the option have proposed giving the BOE and the state superintendent of schools even more control than it currently has, as if that constituted some sort of education reform.

BOE Chairman Breene Harimoto and other members accused Thielen of attacking Superintendent of Education Patricia Hamamoto and of "twisting the facts" in her support for local school boards. Harimoto said Thielen had violated the BOE's code of conduct and ethical standards.

No doubt Thielen's support for true educational reform is a violation of the BOE's unwritten code of bureaucratic preservation.

"The real problem here is that I have taken a different position from the majority of the Board of Education," Thielen said in making a rebuffed offer to debate, in public, the differences she had with her fellow BOE members. "This board is so



unaccustomed and opposed to public discussion and debate that it is resorting to personal attacks as a means to stifle reform."

And that is at the heart of the motivation behind opposing local school boards. It is shared by the BOE, the Department of Education, unions representing teachers and administrators and, apparently, legislators who see their power over various aspects of the educational system being eroded by the home-rule effort.

There is still time for the 2004 Legislature to take a real, meaningful step toward moving the control of Hawaii's public schools out of the hands of bureaucrats and into the hands of voters. This fall's election should include giving voters a chance to say yes or no to a state constitutional amendment setting up local school boards.

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